

How Soon Is Now by falafelfiction

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Summary:

Their soon days came around faster since their yearlong separation, but never soon enough. Seven months after their reunion, Eleven and Mike are still meeting in secret while Hopper still fears for their safety.

How Soon Is Now

El paced the floor of the cabin, her eyes flicking between the door and her wrist watch. The time read 8-0-5. Mike had promised to get here by 8-1-5. He was never late and wouldn't be tonight. It'd been 53 days now since their last meeting. Their soon days came around faster since their yearlong separation, but never soon enough.

"Don't get yourself worked up, kiddo. He'll be here."

Hop sat on the couch pretending to watch TV while really he was watching her out of the corner of his eye. Hop knew El had been in her room *'working herself up'* most of the day. Her tummy was so fluttery she couldn't eat dinner. She'd been staring into the mirror, trying to brush her curls straight. She'd wanted to wear her dress, but Hopper had told her no. He'd said that she'd get bitten to death by bugs out in the forest. El didn't think that was the real reason he wanted her to change. But after she'd agreed jeans and a long sleeve shirt, Hop had tied a bow in her hair and let her use her eye shadow and lip gloss. She was compromise pretty. Not beautiful like she'd been at the Snow Ball. But still pretty.

Deep down she knew Mike wouldn't care how she looked. He'd liked her when she'd had no hair. He'd liked her when she'd been bone thin and all covered in dirt. He wouldn't mind so long as he could see her. Mike didn't get to see her half as much as she saw him. In her mind, El still reached out to Mike's basement late at night after his friends had gone home. She'd find him sitting up alone past 12-1-5, struggling to lose himself in books and board games, restless in the time between their soon days.

Soon always seemed so far away for them.

And when *now* came it was all a blur.

There was a knock and El let out a gasp. Hop had agreed to teach Mike their secret knock and he got it perfect every time. Hop gave a nod and let El be the one to answer. He let her and Mike stand in the doorway, grinning like idiots, before they fell into each other's arms. He let them hug and hold on. He tried not to act like a prison warden

at visiting hours. Even if this was exactly how it felt, El knew the weary policeman was trying. He gave them their reunion for a few seconds longer before rising to his feet and clearing his throat.

“You got your cover story?” he asked Mike.

Mike reluctantly pulled out of their hug, reaching into his pocket and fishing out a sheet of crumbled paper. Mike was clever at coming up with stories. This was why he was always the one who wrote the campaigns for the monster game that he played with his friends. Mike always needed to have a careful cover story planned when he came to the cabin. A lie story that he could tell his parents. Because Mike couldn’t be friends with his parents anymore. At least not when it came to her.

“I told my mom I’m going over to Dustin’s to work on our project for the summer science fair,” he explained. “His mom’s going to be out at a Tupperware party till ten. Dustin says he’ll stay home and cover for me if my mom calls his house. We even recorded samples of my voice on his cassette player so he can fake me answering.”

Mike smirked like this was a really smart idea. Hop just narrowed his eyes. He looked Mike up and down like he was measuring him. Mike got a little bit taller each time he came to their door, but Hop still loomed over him and made a point of doing so.

“Let’s just hope she doesn’t check on you this time,” Hop said.

El looked at Mike and caught him wincing. His cover had fallen through before. Like earlier that year when Hop had allowed them a meeting on Valentine’s Day. He’d microwaved them a meal and then stood out on the porch so that they could share it together. Mike’s cover story for that night had been that he was boycotting all romantic traditions and going over to Lucas’s house to watch a horror movie instead. Lucas’s parents had been out for dinner themselves, but Mike’s dad had forgotten what day it was and Mike’s poor mom – lonely, dateless and restless – had called Lucas’s to ask what time her son would be coming home.

It had been Lucas’s little sister who’d got to the phone first. She’d told his mom that unless Mike had turned into a random redhead girl who

liked playing kissy face with her brother then he was not at their house. This had thrown Mike's mom into a panic. She'd called the police and reported her son missing. When the deputies called Hop they'd had to come up with a new cover story that Mike had been found in the junkyard, spray painting the old school bus. And Mike had been grounded for a month.

"She won't check," Mike insisted. "She's busy at home. Holly has measles."

Hop gave him a grudging nod. "You better be right this time, kid."

"We go now," El interrupted, gripping Mike's hand and tugging him towards the door.

"Be back here in an hour," Hop said sternly. "Tread softly, speak in low voices and don't get too far from the cabin. You see anyone out in the woods, *hide*. You got that?"

"Yeah, loud and clear," muttered Mike, rolling his eyes as he turned away.

"Hey!" Hop snapped, catching hold of Mike's hood. El flinched, fearing another fight between them. Ever since that night she'd returned to the Byer's house, it'd felt like Mike and Hop were on the verge of a second shouting match. If they started shouting then El might start screaming, objects might start flying and she could end up hurting either one of them.

But Hop didn't shout. Instead he thrust a walkie talkie at Mike's chest.

"Radio if you need me," he said. "Don't get stupid."

Mike softened and nodded, slipping the walkie into his rucksack.

Then they were out of the cabin. They were out walking in the woods, finally together, finally alone. As always El let Mike do most of the talking. He caught her up on everything that had been going on. How Lucas and Max had broken up and got back together again twice in the last month and how most of their arguments still started over Max beating Lucas's high scores at the arcade. Mike told her

how he and Will were still really weirded out by their older siblings dating and how Dustin was now the one helping Steve to study for his finals since it had gotten too awkward between him and Nancy. El squeezed his hand, happy to listen, happy he was here. But only halfway happy since she knew Mike would soon be gone.

“So how are things with you?” he asked her at last.

El shrugged. “The same,” she answered.

Mike halted his steps, turning to face her. They both knew what she meant by *the same*. She meant the same long lonely days in the cabin with only the TV for company. The long hours waiting for Hop to come home from work and his regular Morse code messages to say that something had come up and that he’d be getting back late.

El stared back at Mike. It was close to summer now. His face was rosy and his freckles stood out like a rash over his nose and cheeks. El herself was pale and sun-starved as ever. She’d never spent a summer outdoors in her life. That wasn’t going to change this year. It’d be another summer missed with her childhood running out.

“Remember what I told you...” Mike said, deadly serious. “If you feel like you’re going crazy in that cabin...if you ever want to run away again...I’ll come with you. We can go to the city and hide out with your sister. We can make new identities for ourselves so nobody finds us. So you won’t have to live like a prisoner anymore.”

She shook her head. “Mike, your family...”

“I don’t care!” he snapped.

She winced, then added. “Your *friends*.”

“They...they’d understand,” he said, but his eyes looked uncertain and pained. “I can’t lose you again, El. So if you need to leave, I’m coming with you.”

She smiled. It meant a lot to her to see how much Mike meant it. She couldn’t say she wasn’t tempted to escape the cabin again. But she had to hold on. She had to believe in the Dr Owens promise that by the end of this year she could go out into the world as Jane Hopper.

And if she was going to be Jane then she had family to think about too.

“I can’t leave,” she admitted. “He needs me too.”

“The Chief?” Mike frowned. He still struggled with the idea of Hop being her parent. “He’s taking his dad role seriously then?”

She nodded. “He says I can go soon.”

“And you think that he means it this time?”

“He promised,” she said, wincing again because it was harder to believe in his promises this time around, knowing that the old promises had been lies. “He promised me a day. 105 days from today. He promised me that I can start to going to school.”

“But not my school, right?”

She nodded again. Earlier that spring, Hop had arranged for Mr Clarke from Hawkins Middle to come over to the cabin and give El some home schooling. Hop had fed the science teacher their own cover story - that El was his illegitimate daughter from a past fling whose existence he’d only recently been made aware of after her mother had become mentally ill. They’d told Mr Clarke that El had been rescued by child services after many years of neglect. After a few lessons and IQ tests, Mr Clarke had recommended that with extra tutoring El might be ready to enter the seventh or eighth grade this year. But certainly no higher than that.

Mike and his friends started Hawkins High in the fall.

“You’ll have Will,” Mike told her. “He’s missed so much school in the last two years his mom wants him to repeat a grade.”

“So...Will could be my friend?”

“Yeah, for sure. The best friend you could have.”

El smiled. She’d never had the chance to meet Will Byers properly but if Mike liked him so much then she knew she would too. Maybe Will could help to deliver letters between them? Hop brought her

letters from Mike sometimes. Long scribbled letters that she read over and over in the slow empty days between their soon time. El always had to keep a dictionary close by when she was reading Mike's letters. They were full of words of the day.

"Wish I could go to high school with you." She thought for a moment, then asked. "If you missed school, would your parents let you repeat?"

Mike shook his head. "My parents won't let me miss school. I'm already in enough trouble for skipping classes and letting my grades slip. Nancy says she's heard them talking about sending me to a guidance counselor or putting me on Ritalin, since I'm having such problems concentrating. She says that dad's even talked about packing me off to boarding school next semester." He snorted. "I bet the Chief would love it if that happened, right?"

El swallowed hard and didn't answer. She'd never told Mike about all the times that Hop had suggested that they left Hawkins altogether. That Hop had offered to quit his job and move far away so El could begin her new Jane life in a town where nobody ever knew her as the science experiment with superpowers. Hop said that it would be her best chance to live as a normal girl, the best way to keep her safe. But it would mean she could never see Mike again. And after a lot of screaming fights and a lot of broken furniture, Hop was starting to accept that leaving Mike wasn't a plan that El was ever going to consent to.

El pressed Mike's hand again, wishing she could say something to make him happy. More than this halfway happy feeling that they got in these rare meetings. But El was never good with words. She glanced around at the tall trees surrounding them. She looked up at the stars winking through the high branches.

"Pretty..." El said softly.

"Huh?" said Mike.

"The stars," she said pointing. "Pretty."

"Oh yeah," he said, following her gaze. "I like looking at the stars

too. There's really clear skies this time of year. I've got my telescope set up in my bedroom and on nights like this I can find all the major constellations. Wish I could show them to you..."

Mike kicked at the dirt in frustration. El thought about telling him that she didn't mind because she didn't know what a constellation was, but she didn't want to hurt his feelings. Mike suddenly bristled with purpose and marched over to a nearby tree.

"Come on!" he said. "We can't see anything through those branches, but I bet if we climb high enough then the view would be incredible. We could see all the constellations coming out. We could look out over the town and see for miles around!"

El smile widened to see Mike so excited to show her something new. He gripped the lowest branches of the tree and started to pull himself up. But his feet slipped and scrabbled against the bark, his skinny arms not strong enough to lift him. Mike struggled for a moment longer then let himself drop back to the ground. He stood panting against the trunk, seeming too embarrassed to turn and face her, still wanting to climb up to the stars.

El lowered her eyes, focusing on Mike's sneakers. She hadn't used her powers in months but it only took a little concentration to lift his feet off the ground. Mike gasped and spun around in mid-air. He panted for breath, his hands paddling like he was in water. El continued to levitate him, floating him gently above the forest floor.

She smirked, raising an eyebrow. "Higher?"

Mike's face broke into a delirious smile. El knew from the times she'd visited his basement and found him reading comic books or playing with action figures that Mike loved superheroes. And the superheroes that could fly were his favorites. Mike gave her a shaky nod. So she raised her hand, channeling the forces in her mind and sending them out through her fingertips. She used her powers to lift Mike higher into the air, high enough so he could grasp hold of the tree's upper branches, high enough to look through its leaves and see the stars. Mike clutched a branch in one hand and beckoned her to join him with the other.

El took a shuddering breath, knowing she wouldn't be able to lift herself as easily as she'd lifted Mike. The blood was already trickling from her nose. A cold sweat broke out over her skin and she was swayed by a familiar feeling of dizziness. She searched her mind for a memory that would stabilize her powers. But all that was coming into her head was a vision of Mike stepping off a cliff. How he'd fallen so fast. How she'd barely caught him in time. Mike said that she'd saved him that day. But Mike always forgot that El was the one who came into his life and put him in danger. She was still putting him in danger, every day.

She was a danger to him right now. *She* was the monster.

El felt her knees buckling. She heard a branch snap in the trees above her and she lifted her eyes to see Mike dropping, a fledgling superhero losing his power to fly. She gritted her teeth, tasting blood in her mouth as she used everything she had left to slow Mike's fall. She blacked out before he hit the ground.

Seconds later, she came to. She blinked and saw Mike lying sprawled on the ground just a few feet away from her. He was biting down hard on the sleeve of his hoodie to keep himself from screaming. One of his legs was twisted at a strange angle. El didn't have the strength to stand, so she crawled over to Mike on her belly. His rucksack had burst and its contents had spilled all over the ground around them. El snatched up the walkie talkie.

"Help," she rasped into its speaker. "We need *help*."

Hop had always promised he would stay back at the cabin when she and Mike went on their walks. He'd promised he wouldn't follow them, that he'd give them their space and privacy. But given how quickly Hop reached the clearing, he had to have followed their tracks at least halfway into the forest. El should've known that promise had been one of his *com*-promises.

Hop had his gun out as he arrived on the scene. He glanced down at them once, then his eyes swept the terrain, searching for who or *what* had hurt Mike.

"It was me..." El confessed through tears. "My fault..."

Hop met her stare. He didn't ask any questions, but holstered his gun and then sank to his knees beside them. Mike lay tensed and trying not to cry. He tried to sit up, only for Hop to shove him back down again. He took out a flashlight and pointed it to Mike's leg, laying a tentative hand on his jeans. El sat close, squeezing Mike's arm.

"Dislocated kneecap," said Hop. He sighed, handing El his flashlight. He placed one hand on Mike's trembling shin, then pressed the other hand firmly to his shoulder, holding him still. "Keep biting down on your sleeve, kid. This is going to hurt."

In one swift movement, Hop popped the twisted knee back into its socket. Mike's whole body jerked at the pain, his moan muffled against his hoodie. El felt a surge of anger pass through her. Seeing Hop hurt Mike, even if he was really *helping* him, made her feel so angry that she could've flung the policeman across the clearing. But she controlled herself. She swallowed it down. She remembered the person who she was really mad at was herself.

El followed with the flashlight as Hop carried Mike back through the woods and set him down in the backseat of his truck. Hop disappeared into the cabin for a moment, leaving El to hover beside the car door, tears still streaming down her cheeks.

"I'm so sorry," she whimpered. "I was so *stupid*."

Mike was crying too but he forced a smile.

"Don't be sorry," he told her. "It was beautiful."

She squinted at him. "What?"

"The stars. The sky. I wish you could've seen it too."

Before he could say another word, Hop came back and handed Mike a bottle of water and some pills.

"Get those down you, kid," he said. "That's the good stuff."

As soon as Mike had swallowed the medicine, Hop slammed the car door shut between them and climbed into the driver's seat. El started to round the truck to the passenger side, but Hop stuck his head out

of the window and jabbed a finger at the house.

“Get inside,” he ordered. “You stay here.”

Anger boiled up inside of El again as Hop pulled out of the driveway. He hadn’t even allowed them to say goodbye. She knew she’d messed up. She’d *really* messed up. But Hop had spoken to her like she was a bad dog that’d bitten someone. Like she was a wild animal that he still needed to tame with strict rules and punishments. *Like Papa, just like Papa...*

El shook her head furiously, trying not to think like that. But she couldn’t help herself. She stormed back into the cabin, slamming both its front door and her bedroom door behind her without even touching them. She threw herself down on her bed, crying into her pillow just as hard as she’d ever cried in those little locked rooms back at the lab. When her tears finally subsided she stared at the numbers on her watch. The time read 9-0-5. She and Mike hadn’t got their full hour together. The hour that Hop had promised her.

Mike hadn’t even had the chance to kiss her this time...

She lay there a long time without moving. At 9-4-5 she heard footsteps on the porch. She sat up in bed as Hop came to stand in her doorway. He didn’t look mad. His face was cold and disappointed in her. For some reason this expression scared her more than if he’d come home yelling.

“So new cover story...” Hop began, his voice toneless. “Mike left Dustin’s house early because Dustin had a bellyache. And instead of going home Mike cycled over to Will’s house. Then the two of them went riding around the dirt roads, popping wheelies on their bikes until Mike took a fall and busted his knee. Will sounded the alarm and Joyce drove Mike to the hospital, then called his parents.” Hop shrugged. “Mike came up with it on our way over to the Byers.”

“His parents,” El murmured. “He’ll be in trouble?”

“With his track record...yeah, I’d say so.”

She swallowed. “Grouned?”

“Grounded? With that knee he won’t be moving off the couch for a while. He won’t make it into school, never mind trekking all the way out here.”

El flinched, remembering how Mike had said that his parents wouldn’t want him missing any school. How he’d said his grades were already slipping. But she’d wanted there to be a reason he was held back so they could go to school together. She hadn’t broken his knee on purpose...*had she*? Was it the monster inside her who’d done this?

She shuddered. “When...when can I see him?”

Hop’s face hardened. “Are you seriously asking me that right now?” He shook his head. “What in the hell were you *thinking*? I let you go for a simple walk with that Wheeler kid and then for no reason at all you’re using your powers to make him take flight?!”

“Not for no reason,” she muttered.

“Excuse me?” he snapped back.

“I...I wanted to do something special. Our walks are always the same.” A lump rose in her throat. “Everything in *my life* is always the same.”

“The same is safe,” Hop reminded her. “You take risks, people get hurt. You could’ve broken his neck! You two are a danger to each other, you know that, right?”

“I’m a danger to everyone. That means you too.”

“Yeah but I’m a grown up. I can handle it. Mike’s in over his head.”

“You can’t stop me seeing him,” she warned.

Hop laughed bitterly. “You think I don’t know that? That’s the part that really scares me. I can’t stop you doing *anything*. I can only hope you’ll see sense.”

El considered this for a moment. “Compromise,” she said. “I won’t ask to see Mike again soon. But you’ll take Mike letters from me.”

“No...” Hop answered almost immediately.

El blinked at him, appalled. “But I compromised!”

“Mike’s parents know he’s been telling them lies. They know he first started lying to them when he was hiding you in their basement. If Mike’s mom knows she’s being lied to she may start hunting for the truth. If she finds letters, then she’ll know you two are back in contact. The Wheelers still think you’re a Russian spy, remember? And I’m telling you...if Mike’s parents breathe a word about you being in contact in their *bugged* house then the bad men will come back for you.”

El drew her knees into her chest, trembling. She remembered that night that she’d fought the monster at the school and then escaped from the upside down. She remembered being soaked in mucus, shivering with cold and staggering exhausted through the darkened town. All she had wanted to do was to get home to Mike’s basement and curl up in her den. She’d wanted clean clothes, toasted Eggos and sleep. But she’d found Mike’s house surrounded by blue flashing cars and stern men in uniform. She’d realized that she could never go back to that home again. The first home she’d ever known. It wasn’t safe anymore. Not for her and not for him either. Now Mike’s home was a baited trap waiting to catch her. The bad men could come back there any time. Hop was always telling her ‘*What if?*’ stories about those men and their guns coming for Mike and his family. They were the stories that Hop told to keep her from doing something stupid. Because nothing scared her more than his stories of bad things happening to Mike.

El hugged her arms around her shins. “When will it get easier? For us?”

Hop didn’t answer her. It terrified her that he didn’t answer.

“Say soon,” she begged him. “At least say *soon*.”

But Hop wouldn’t say it. *Friends don’t lie*.

All he could do was sit on her bed, wrap her in his arms and rock her as she cried.

“I’m sorry, kiddo,” he said. “I wish I knew...”